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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000521

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RIYADH PASS TO DHAHRAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/16/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EINT](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#)  
SUBJECT: SAUDI BLOGGER/ACTIVIST PREVENTED FROM TRAVEL TO  
ARAB FREE PRESS FORUM IN BEIRUT

REF: A. REF A: RIYADH 1657  
[1](#)B. REF B: RIYADH 0005

Classified By: CG Martin Quinn for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: On December 10, 2008, Saudi authorities prevented blogger and activist Fouad Al-Farhan from boarding a plane to Beirut where he was scheduled to address an annual (December 10-14) conference on freedom of the press. At a meeting with Consulate Jeddah officers in November, Al-Farhan, who was detained for four months ending in April of 2008, announced his intention to launch a new website in the style of the Huffington Post on December 10. He also claimed he helped organize the recent country-wide fast to show solidarity with jailed intellectuals (Reftel A), and that he was personally warned by Assistant Interior Minister Prince Mohammad bin Naif to cease his political writings. Al-Farhan is one of a small group of activists, none of whom have significant influence within the KSA, who ran afoul of the MOI because he was calling for the release of a number of individuals jailed on terrorism charges. END SUMMARY.

Travel ban  
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[1](#)2. (S/NF) Fouad Al-Farhan, a Saudi blogger and political activist (please protect), was prevented recently from traveling from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon to speak at the annual Arab Free Press Forum, organized by the World Association of Newspapers and the Lebanese daily An-Nahar. According to another Saudi blogger, Yasser Al Ghaslan (please protect), Arab journalists from Tunisia and Syria were also prevented from traveling to the conference by their governments. Al-Farhan seemed unaware that he would be prohibited from leaving the country when he arrived at the airport the evening of December 10. The travel ban appears to be yet another round in the ongoing confrontation between Al-Farhan and Saudi authorities which started last year.

Background  
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[1](#)3. (S/NF) On November 19, Acting CG and Pol/EconOff met with Al-Farhan whose four-month detention from December 2007 through April 2008 (Ref B) was widely covered by international media. Al-Farhan's day job is as a content manager for Okaz (Arabic) and the Saudi Gazette (English), two widely-read mainstream daily newspapers. This was the first meeting between State Department officers and Al-Farhan though he reported previous contact with Jeddah GRPO.

[1](#)4. (S/NF) Al-Farhan expressed ambivalence regarding contacts with the USG. On the one hand he complained that the US

government has been noticeably removed from both his own case and that of other human rights activists. However, while he urged US signals of support for free speech in Saudi Arabia, he noted that many of his associates do not wish to have any involvement with foreign governments, preferring that their movement be entirely home-grown and independent. Al-Farhan also said that even meeting with USG employees was risky, claiming that Assistant Interior Minister Prince Mohammad bin Naif (MBN) publicly proclaimed he would "cut out the tongues" of any activist who meets with foreign officials. At the same time, Al-Farhan expressed interest in the International Visitor Program, emphasizing his hope that some of the younger activists and bloggers with whom he works might have the chance to go to the US for professional visits, perhaps focusing on law.

Mixed royal signals?  
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¶5. (S/NF) Al-Farhan said that when he was released from his detention in April 2008, MBN met with him in person to advise him to curtail his actions, explaining that Saudi Arabia is engaged in a war on terror and that his type of activity would not be tolerated. Al-Farhan reported that he was told to behave and to act as a good citizen which he understood to mean a person who does not engage in political activity.

¶6. (S/NF) Al-Farhan claimed that several other princes have contacted him since his release expressing support for his actions including a "Prince Turki." (Note: It is not clear to which Prince Turki he was alluding.)

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Al-Farhan role in protest fast  
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¶7. (S/NF) Al-Farhan claimed that he played a significant role in organizing the recent fast -- which participants referred to hyperbolically as a "hunger strike" -- held in early November throughout the Kingdom in protest against the detention of eleven intellectuals (Reftel B). There was never any public acknowledgment that Al-Farhan was involved with these protests and his name and phone number did not appear alongside the list of others who put their information on a publicly-accessible website. Al-Farhan claimed that he approached a number of families regarding the fast and achieved success in getting four of them to participate.

Al-Farhan's detention  
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¶8. (S/NF) Al-Farhan described how he had been questioned and warned by authorities in 2006, long before his eventual arrest. According to his account, he was picked up in his office by MOI officials and forced to go with them for a chat over tea. They warned him to stop his blogging activity and said that if he followed the order he would be left alone. Following the meeting, Al-Farhan did cease his activity for some time until he felt there was an opening to resume.

¶9. (S/NF) In 2007 Al-Farhan's blog became increasingly critical of the SAG, calling out a list of ten SAG officials whom he didn't like and unintentionally encouraging other bloggers to produce their own lists. According to Al-Farhan, the Saudis began viewing him as an instigator and detained him on December 10, 2007, Human Rights Day. Al-Farhan noted that the significance of the date was not lost on the police who allegedly promised that there would be a cake waiting for him in jail to mark the occasion. Al-Farhan described the detention center where he was sent as a political prison, and said he was jailed next to Al Qaida terrorists and held in solitary confinement. He stated that he was not allowed contact with lawyers and was held without charge, and also denied regular family contact. He added that he was denied access to all printed materials and even the ability to go

outside, which were considered privileges.

¶10. (S/NF) Al-Farhan said that friends and fellow bloggers supported him during his detention by raising contributions of 15,000 Saudi Riyals monthly (roughly 4000 USD) to help support his wife and children. He explained that there is an understanding among this group that they will come to each other's aid should any be jailed for political activity. Additionally many individuals came to Al-Farhan's rescue through the creation of various websites aimed at releasing the blogger and publicizing his work. This included the well-publicized "Free Fouad" Facebook page. Al-Farhan believes that his detention may have inspired additional young bloggers and activists, and pointed to the electronic dissemination and re-publication of many of his more controversial pieces by supporters.

¶11. (S/NF) Al-Farhan said that during his detention, the government-run Human Rights Commission would not consider his case, claiming that it was too political. The quasi-governmental National Society for Human Rights offered to make a statement and was somewhat helpful. Al-Farhan claims to have links with outside human rights organizations including Human Rights Watch. Al-Farhan has been largely inactive since his release, aside from some limited writing and his involvement in the recent fast. He said he has not been contacted by the police or by the MOI, which he finds surprising. He pointed out that many of his peers that have been arrested for similar types of activity have had to go through monthly parole-like meetings to insure that they are keeping out of trouble.

#### A Return to blogging

¶12. (S/NF) Al-Farhan stated that he and several close associates planned to launch a new website on December 10 in order to focus attention on important news pieces, particularly those related to the issue of freedom of speech. He described the new site as a Saudi version of the Drudge Report or the Huffington Post. To date the website has yet to make its debut. While Al-Farhan initially intended to limit commentary to the organizers of the blog, he envisioned

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eventually opening up the site for public comment. The plan was for the website to operate on a non-Saudi ISP. Al-Farhan stated that he did not expect the site to be censored at the outset through the blocking of the website on Saudi servers, but he thought that eventually censorship would occur. (Note: Many Saudis use constantly changing proxy servers to access blocked websites so basing the website abroad will make it very difficult for authorities to prevent access to the site.) Meanwhile, Al-Farhan's wife has begun her own blog focusing on women's rights. Al-Farhan said his wife had not initially supported his political activity, but over time has been won over and now wants to do her part to promote reform.

#### Al-Farhan's agenda

¶13. (S/NF) Al Farhan describes himself as an advocate of free speech, freedom of assembly, and the right to publish in all media. He also calls for government reform and expanded women's rights. He believes that the Free Fouad movement cut across many lines including age and degree of religious conservatism. Saudi's youthful population and rising internet penetration have led to a growing number of observers and participants in the blogging community. Al-Farhan claims that many of his original supporters were Islamists but that now the movement has become more broad-based. He believes that the members share a common love of country and religion, and a desire to be able to criticize the government in public and private in a push for freer speech.

¶14. (S/NF) Al-Farhan does not typically work with other major blogs such as Al Saha and Tumar. He says that these blogs appeal only to the elite, whereas he is trying to appeal to the common people. This is part of the reason that Fouad chooses to write only in Arabic, despite English blogs being less scrutinized by the government.

¶15. (S/NF) COMMENT: Al-Farhan is one of a small group of activists, none of whom so far have significant influence inside the Kingdom. As the Mission understands it, he ran afoul the MOI because he was calling - witting or not -- for the release of a number of individuals jailed on terrorism charges. While these persons claimed to be mere political reformers, there is evidence, recorded in our own USG channels, that at least three had terrorist finance links. It is not clear to us that Al-Farhan actually had a role in organizing the recent fast protest, but if true, it would represent a step beyond his largely cyber-based advocacy. However, as noted in Reftel A, such "protests" are largely symbolic and do not as yet garner much support beyond the confines of cyberspace, however much they irritate the SAG. It is likely that the government will not welcome the launch of a new website/blog by Al-Farhan, should he decide to go forward with his plans following his travel ban, but Mission agrees with Al-Farhan's assessment that initially at least, it will not/not be censored. END COMMENT.  
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